

O 111214Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9557
INFO AMEMBASSY ATHENS
AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
AMEMBASSY DHAKA
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
AMEMBASSY OSLO
AMEMBASSY TOKYO
AMCONSUL CHENNAI
AMCONSUL MUMBAI
AMCONSUL TORONTO
USEU BRUSSELS
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK
USMISSION GENEVA
HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
DIA WASHINGTON DC
NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
SECDEF WASHDC
CDRUSARPAC FT SHAFTER HI//APCW/APOP//
CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI//J3/J332/J52//

UNCLAS COLOMBO 000277

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA (BOUCHER, CAMP), SCA/INS AND PRM
STATE ALSO PASS USAID
AID/W FOR ANE/SCA, DCHA/FFP (DWORKEN, KSHEIN)
AID/W FOR DCHA/OFDA (MORRISP, ACONVERY, RTHAYER, RKERR)
ATHENS FOR PCARTER
BANGKOK FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA (WBERGER)
KATHMANDU FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA AND POL (SBERRY)
GENEVA FOR RMA (NKYLOH, NHILGERT, MPITOTTI)
USUN NEW YORK FOR ECOSOC (D MERCADO)
SECDEF FOR OSD - POLICY
PACOM ALSO FOR J-5

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: MOPS PREF PHUM PGOV PREL ASEC CE
SUBJECT: Northern Sri Lanka SitRep 29

Ref: A) Colombo 265 B) Colombo 258 C) Colombo 250 D) Colombo 248
E) Colombo 247 F) Colombo 245 G) Colombo 240 H) Colombo 235 I)
Colombo 230 J) Colombo 217 K) Colombo 173

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The UN reports heavy shelling within the safe zone on March 10, resulting in many civilian casualties. A medical team arrived from India to establish and run a field hospital in Pulmoddai that will treat medical evacuees from the safe zone. Despite Government pledges to cease use of heavy artillery, Government-run television showed footage of army shelling of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) positions. End Summary.

"Worst Day" in Safe Zone

¶2. (SBU) The UN Resident Representative shared with Ambassador reports of increased shelling within the safe zone on March 10, causing 124 deaths and 254 injuries due to artillery fire. A reputable local contact working to provide medical care in the safe zone referred to March 10 as "the worst day ever," noting "air burst shells, incendiary shells (white phosphorous) in addition to high explosive shells" within the safe zone. According to the UN, this medical worker "literally begged" the UN for medicines to treat injuries, as they are forced to operate on severe injuries without anaesthetics. (Note: The Government has not permitted anaesthetics to be shipped into the safe zone due to fears they will be used to aid wounded LTTE cadres instead of civilians.) ICRC pushed for an immediate evacuation effort for the wounded, however ICRC reports this ship was turned back on March 11 due to government concerns of a potential security incident.

¶3. (SBU) The UN further reports that shelter and sanitation conditions in the safe zone worsened due to heavy rains on March 10.

Heavy seas also forced a ship carrying food aid to depart the safe zone on March 9 after only 30% of the 500MT was offloaded (ref A). The ship is still in Trincomalee waiting for the weather to clear.

Army Shells LTTE Positions

¶4. (SBU) Despite repeated Government pledges that they will no longer use heavy artillery, tanks or aerial bombing given the number of civilians in close proximity to the conflict (ref K), the state-run news channel, ITN, ran footage on March 10 showing army shelling of LTTE positions near Puthukkudiyiruppu. The Government continues to maintain that there is no deliberate firing into the safe zone. Ambassador is scheduled to meet with Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa March 12 to protest government shelling into the safe zone.

Indian Medical Team Arrives

¶5. (SBU) On March 9, an Indian medical team arrived in Sri Lanka, following the Government of India's pledge to provide expertise and resources to assist trapped civilians. The team traveled to Pulmoddai, where they will establish a field hospital capable of receiving ICRC-assisted medical evacuees from the safe zone (ref B). The change in disembarkation location from Trincomalee to Pulmoddai

(half the distance from Mullativu) will cut travel time at sea, potentially allowing more frequent evacuations and relieving pressure on the overburdened Trincomalee hospital. The Ministry of Health announced on March 5 that the new site at Pulmoddai would be operational by March 13.

Government Comments on Sea Evacuation Plans

¶6. (SBU) Media outlets continue to refer to potential plans for the U.S. military to evacuate civilians by sea. Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama is quoted in the Sri Lankan Daily News as calling these reports "baseless and incorrect." He further notes that while the GSL has not received any such proposals from foreign countries, the government welcomes proposals from countries or foreign agencies "if they are not concerned in safeguarding the terrorists." (Comment: The Foreign Minister's use of this rhetoric brings into the official lexicon language first used by the Sinhalese extremist politician Wimal Weerawansa, ref A.)

IDP Statistics

¶7. (SBU) The Government reports 297 civilians were rescued in Puthukkudiyiruppu East on March 10 and were transferred to Kilinochchi welfare centers (Note: No international organizations are present at this location, where the government conducts initial screening of internally displaced persons.) The UN estimates that a total of 36,575 IDPs arrived in Government-held territory from January 1-March 5.

BLAKE